

“Enfleshed and Irrational” (2Jan22)
John 1:1-18

The Word became flesh and lived among us. Adapting the Spanish version—or for that matter, the Latin—could be: the Verb became meat, the active incarnation. Carne, like carnivore.

John offers lofty, even cosmic poetics, but it’s about the very realest down-to-earth existence of “with-us-ness.”* Spiritual and physical can no longer be thought of as separate. Not like seeing the face of Jesus in a piece of toast, this is about God actually acting in the meat, enfleshed, in skin and bones.

To start with that, give yourself a little pinch, so you can feel this reality. Notice your body, maybe a part that feels sore, and maybe a body part you’re grateful for. Now notice the last person you touched, had physical contact with, another real person.

For conceiving of God conceived as a real person, born as a baby, recall a baby you were around. Next, envision somebody who used to celebrate Christmas with you who’s now gone. Recall encountering somebody who looked different from you. And a friend from when you were younger. How about the worst person you know? These all relate to God incarnate in our flesh.

Next, for incarnation as meat, recall the last piece of meat you ate, the senses that went with it.

And since this is about the Creator entering creation, remember the last other creature you saw, and what leaf buds are like in the spring. What’s the largest animal you’ve seen? What colors were in a recent sunset? What did it look like the last time you smashed a bug?

To keep it Christmas-y, what’s a favorite gift, a cherished ornament, a tradition you were involved in, a song that always worms its way into your ear?

This is where God arrives. With these specifics of your reality, let’s turn to give most of this sermon to words on incarnation and Christmas from Madeline L’Engle in a 1977 book called “The

Irrational Season.” Writing about the Word made flesh and the people and activities of our lives, with your particular personal details, she says this, for you, is incarnation. She goes on:

The Word which spoke the galaxies became enfleshed.

So Christmas is still for me a time of hope, of hope for the courage to love and accept love, a time when I can forget that my Christology is extremely shaky and can rejoice in God's love through love of family and friends.

Christology. I'm all right through the first verses of John's Gospel, verses which are in the language of poetry which breaks through reason and strengthens my courage. My heart lifts at that first great cry which brought creation into being; I rejoice in Christ, the second person of the Trinity making all those galaxies burning with incredible brightness, those brilliant flaming suns. It's the Word coming to us as Jesus of Nazareth which confounds my imagination.

All flesh is mortal, and the Word in the flesh was no exception in mortal terms. So the birth of the Creator in human flesh was an event as shattering and terrible as the endtimes.

What kind of flawed, failed love is this? Why should we rejoice on Christmas? It's not the secular world which presents me with problems about Christmas, it's God.

Cribb'd, cabined, and confined within the contours of a human infant.

The infinite defined by the finite? The Creator of all life thirsty and abandoned? Why would God do such a thing?

What one of us can understand a love so great that we would willingly limit our unlimitedness, put the flesh of mortality over our immortality, accept all the pain and grief of humanity, submit to betrayal by that humanity, be killed by it, and die a total failure on a cross?

Oh, yes, according to Scripture the Lord throws a few thunderbolts when angry, but by now we must have caused so much anger that it's a wonder God hasn't wiped us out entirely, at least

* in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, p186

on this recalcitrant planet. We are surely one of God's failures; God loved us enough to come to us, and we didn't want him, and this incredible visit ended in total failure (in human terms), and this failure gives me cause to question all failure, and all success.

And even after failure God continues to be concerned for us.

We can, if we will, recognize as God is manifested in love, total, giving love. And I believe that in one way or another we are all meant to receive this as Mary did.

And she concludes with a poem:

This is the irrational season

When hope blooms bright and wild.

Had Mary been filled with reason

*There'd have been no room for the child.***

We have moved from your very vivid regular reality to God who acts unimaginably on human terms—and back again!—the necessary irrationality, this mystery that the infinite is made known by the finite, eternal God in a baby born and who died, remaining present in your flesh and each person and all you know, as simple as your daily life and yet therefore all the more unrecognizable.

While you're continuing to consider that and absorb it into your flesh, we'll shortly get to communion, where this God beyond the galaxies is received into your body again, revealed to you and concealed, all of God in a piece of bread.

** adapted and edited, including for gendered language